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MCC Conference – September 2002

Text III – “Holiness and the Queer Vocation”

I read a great deal. In my line of work, as in yours, it is simply a matter of survival. We *surely* could not do what we do as effectively if we did not keep ourselves “in touch” with the broader currents of our field. I read a lot in queer culture, as I am sure you do, and also in religion and spirituality, though your readings in this area are no doubt far more serious and comprehensive than mine. Sometimes, I feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of all the reading I should be doing, but know very well that I will never, ever get around to completing. The piles of books lying around in my home certainly bear witness to that fact. Of course, a good part of why we read has to do with pleasure, with the sheer joy of vibrating to the beauty of a particularly well-turned phrase, or discovering an important human truth in some character’s sayings and doings. If you are anything like me, you read to survive. And if it wasn’t for the reading, there would not be much writing.

Yesterday,
In yesterday’s talk, I spoke of the queer touch, of how we, as queer people, can so readily and sympathetically resonate to the abject, marginal status of historical and contemporary others, and how this can be a source of empowerment and healing for us. This solidarity has its source in the nature of our erotic desires, precisely because of their transgressive and non-normative nature. I am a romantic. I believe that this queer touch is really the touch of the Spirit, moving and sashaying *her* way through history, turning things upside down, permitting us to engage others like us in a vast enterprise of queer subversion and re-creation. We are a communion of most uncertain and unusual saints.

Reading, like the erotic touch, can change our lives, and thereby alter the world. In fact, I believe there can be no greater or nobler end to a good book, though I do admit that the pleasure of reading can also be a very fine and perfect end in itself. The change is not always perceptible nor is it necessarily grandiose, but it is always there, nagging at us and pushing us forward to an expanded consciousness of our reality. We all have our reading stories, of how a particular author's outlook irrevocably shifted our own. Mine have to do, among others, with the gilded words of Theilard de Chardin and Daniel Berrigan, of Karl Marx and Christopher Isherwood, of Jean Genet and, yes, all those lurid and moving Lives of the Saints which have haunted my daydreams, if not my nightmares. Reading and writing are also, for me, acts of necessary and revolutionary queer discipline. They are two of the most powerful tools of re-appropriation and liberation. When you think about it, this is really not that much different from the ~~frank and public expression of~~ ^{same-sex} ~~same-sex erotic desire~~ or, to some, the equally disturbing contention that ~~this~~ desire is an avenue of spiritual growth. In reading and writing queer, as in touching, screwing, and loving queer, especially if we boldly claim all these human acts for ourselves, we disturb and challenge, as much as we invent and create anew.

Recently, I read a particularly ^{wonderful} ~~amazing~~ book, a ^{real} ~~great~~ eye-opener. It is not a great book by any stretch of the imagination, but I believe it to be an incredibly important one for us as queer people. It is the sort of book one would like to have written. Though the author writes about gay men specifically, his insights carry significant implications for all of us. The book is by David Nimmons, and its title is The Soul beneath the Skin, subtitled The Unseen Hearts and Habits of Gay Men. You may have already read it. If not, I suggest

you do. It is the sort of book that brings hope back into our too often jaded lives. This is the sort of work that makes me believe even more strongly in this ephemeral queer touch that we have been talking about, the spirit moving through and with us, down and across history and culture. I find the title also quite wonderful: the notion that underneath and through our skin, our erotic desires, there breathes and moves a greater and more lasting spiritual force, one ever engaged in its marvelous work of cultural change.

Nimmons' thesis is not new, though his argumentation certainly and radically is. It is the old observation that we queer folks (in ~~this~~ ^{in his book,} case, gay men) have an important role to play in the transformation of human consciousness and social arrangements, precisely because of our differences. This idea goes back to some of our most illustrious ancestors: Edward Carpenter and Harry Hay, among others, and even down today to those searching for that problematic and illusive gay gene. It is a mainstay of queer spiritual thinking. What Nimmons sets out to do, however, is to ~~prove scientifically~~ (sociologically/~~that is~~) what has always been a bit of a mystico-philosophical ideal. And he does so eloquently and persuasively, and you walk away feeling very good about yourself and your community.

The Soul beneath the Skin argues that gay men are profoundly altering traditional cultural conceptions of masculinity along six different vectors: public violence, caretaking and volunteerism, sexual desire and intimacy, friendship and relationships, relations with women, and notions of public play and bliss. Nimmons goes one crucial step further: not only are gay men altering the rules of the game about what it means to be a man, they are proposing nothing less than a new kind of public ethic, though we regrettably refuse to

acknowledge this in our negative obsessions with the superficial trappings of gay culture. In other words, we are fashioning a new type of masculine identity and, more powerfully and significantly, teaching a confused world what it might mean to be truly human. I quote: "Queer-inspired practices, from Radical Faerie gatherings to AIDS volunteer buddy teams, shimmer with notions of communal caretaking and altruism. At their best, they recall nothing so much as New Testament teachings of agape and caritas, male embodiments of service and nurture, nonviolence and gender peace, brotherhood and friendship, all spiced with equal dollops of sexuality and spectacle. Only in this case, the apostles are wearing Calvins or Abercrombie and Fitch... and sometimes not even that. ~~(Talk about a queer exegesis!)~~ Yet look at the soul beneath the skin, and you see we are rewriting the defaults of what a culture of men can be with and for each other."

quote two
I would like to read a number of passages from the book this morning. They speak to our theme of what queer saints, all of us, could and should be doing – or, in fact, already are.

From the opening chapter: "The time has come to note the experiments of heart and habit now arising in gay worlds, to discern what they mean for gay men ourselves and for the shared world culture. Because our cultural practices don't just differ from those of the dominant society, they shape them. America is a synthetic culture, with a long history of cultural borrowing. In that light, this people – public, self-identified gay men, gathered in communities – are just a few short decades off the boat. But ours is an odd niche, for we are emigrants and immigrants both, all without ever having left our own shores. Perhaps we are more accurately understood not as immigrants at all, but as a recently emerging

indigenous American culture. We are still in the process of becoming, the ink still wet on our ways and practices. But we have already proven ourselves a prolific source of societal change.

“It turns out that the T-shirt was right: We’re not in Kansas anymore. And because we’re not, neither is Kansas. Many aspects of gay male values – social, moral, communal, and sexual – powerfully challenge those in the dominant culture. ~~As we see norms and practices born in West Hollywood and Chelsea take root in Wyoming and Chattanooga,~~ we are already shifting deeply held practices of majority culture. ~~They open a larger question: Do these practices offer any pragmatic hope?~~ In a culture where male violence is endemic and male nurturance and caregiving contested; where gender relations roil with confusion and distrust; where faith in community wanes and we struggle to support volunteerism and service; where one marriage in two ends in divorce; where isolation crowds out intimacy and the pursuit of pleasure arouses suspicion – are there lessons to be gleamed here? Abundant data suggests that gay men’s communities are inventing a new mode of male. Can our nation find gifts here, a cultural patrimony for our shared life as a people?

“Philosopher Michel Foucault once spoke of gay social worlds as “unique historic opportunities for an elaboration of personal and ethical creativity analogous to that practiced by certain moral athletes in classical antiquity. Only now such creativity need not be restricted to a social elite or a single, privileged gender, but could become the common property of an entire subculture.” Here, on homo turf, it has. Here we get to

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write our own codes of conduct, codes that are themselves being invented through the rich social experiments we undertake. Together such codes compose, proclaim, and celebrate, then transmit and enact, a newly chosen social ethics.”

From the chapter on safer sex altruism: “Look at the social forms and rituals that we have evolved, the acts we commit, the rules many of us live by daily. From safer sex to disclosure to partner protection, we are working to take care of each other in a myriad of ways, subtle and overt. We do not always succeed, but we do more sexual caretaking than any other social strata of men. Ironical, isn’t it? Once again, a century later, it is our love – with and for each other – that dare not speak its name.”

And
Finally, From the chapter dealing with bliss, one of my personal favorites: “Like so much of what we do, our bending the rules to find bliss holds implications for the wider culture. Our larger society devalues play, and readily dismisses its implications. In our time and social moment, play and bliss-seeking are dismissed as “mere hedonism,” mindless indulgence, as shameful, disreputable, immature, or just plain wrong. But look deeper, and you see that this revaluing of play has a potent magic. Historically, gay men have been excluded from full enfranchisement in the citizenry of men. When we emigrated to a queer new world in our quest for bliss, we became outlaws before the institutions of family, work, church, government, and military. Our quest for bliss placed us outside society’s pillars of power. Viewed as something less than “real” men, we were not permitted the benefits of society’s version of “true manhood,” as fathers or husbands, as soldiers or priests, as leaders or presidents. As we were denied those benefits, we were

also freed of some burdens of masculinity's iron yoke. Being exiled to the margins gives one more latitude to frolic, indulge frivolity, and savor silliness. That is, to play.

"In that play we prod and poke at accepted truths, which makes it an inherently political act. Our very collective existence reflects a political tension with the structures of authoritarian social control. Simply by being, we suggest that bliss is pursuable, at times even attainable. We embody the principle that all citizens have a potential to trust their hearts, recast the rules, sass the system, and seek their bliss – and that things may turn out happily. As such, we become living, breathing reminders that rules are negotiable. That makes us both envied and feared by a larger society that demands its citizens color within the lines."

I want to make a few general remarks about these passages. First, ~~we need~~ to remember ~~that~~, even though David Nimmons' focus is obviously gay men and the broader culture of masculinity, his observations can and should be expanded to the social and cultural roles of queer people generally. Altruism, caretaking, marginality, or the quest for bliss are certainly not exclusively gay male things, far from it. Second, you may think that our author is being unduly optimistic or apologetic about gay men and their lifestyles. To a certain extent he is, though I should hasten to add that it is a refreshing change from all the neo-conservative, anti-erotic dribble we have been fed by some of our gay thinkers in recent years. The thing about Nimmons' book is that it is passionate, convincing, joyful, and certainly very eloquent. He asks us to take ourselves and our culture seriously for once. That is indeed a radical, mind-altering challenge, but a very, very necessary one.

Now, "Queer saints?" you may ask, rather puzzled. Really, what is he going on about? Well, let's talk a bit about sanctity and what it means – and here, I must warn you, I will get very Catholic and sociological on you, though perhaps not as medieval as you may think. Though we tend to associate sainthood – perhaps a bit too pejoratively – with a certain pre-Reformation form of Catholicism, *as you know,* saints are found in all religious traditions.

Saints represent one of the most accessible forms of religious or spiritual practice. The veneration of holy men and women reflects much about how people view and apprehend the sacred, and how they choose to define themselves in relation to it. Saints, after all, once were real people. Because of this, they are considerably easier to relate to in a meaningful way than the somewhat distant and powerful figure of the godhead. We can establish personal relationships with saints, and the old story of the saint's statue being placed face to the wall because she or he failed to come through on some request is very telling in this regard. We feel we can punish saints for failing us as intercessors, even though they are ultimately seen as being repositories of divine grace and power. We fear them, while still treating them like children. We revere them, but we never really forget that they were once subject to the same human foibles and needs as us.

Saints perform a dual role of mediation and model. They are at once intercessory and exemplary. We can model our lives on those of the saints. We know how they lived and died, and the kinds of sufferings and obstacles they had to overcome. Saints are also heroic. They can teach us that mundane, everyday existence can be glorified, and that it is very much possible to surmount and transcend human contingency. In this sense,

saints, while still remaining intensely human, become almost superhuman. They make it possible for us – indeed, they challenge us – to be the same as them. This notion of heroism was central to my own appreciation of saints in my early youth. It framed my religious and social experience as a Catholic boy, spurring me on to heights of adulatory self-control and piety, and providing me with a context within which it all somehow made sense. If my hero was the saint, then I had to be as larger-than-life as he was. I also had to attain a similar state of heroic perfection. ~~I also had to learn to control my sexual feelings and my fluttering hunger for the sweet touch of other boys, as the saints themselves controlled their myriad of intensely strong and obsessive urges.~~

Saints are sensual beings, and the forms of piety which they elicit can be equally sensual, and sometimes even sexual, in both their form and content. Anyone who has had the opportunity to observe the veneration of saints' statues in intensely Catholic Latin countries, for example, is struck almost immediately by the care and attention heaped upon them. They are bathed and clothed, covered with flowers or dripping in bright red droplets of blood, gaudy and almost comical in their painted features, and lit by the reflective glow of a thousand votive lights. Religious icons or holy figures – whether East or West – are treated in the same way. Saints can be like adult dolls. We love to play with them, feel them, dress them up, and display them. Their graven figures and imagined bodies become amulets, protecting us against the more frightening parts of our natures – and sometimes, those of others. Perhaps they really are inspired copies of us, performative extensions of who we think we should be at our best moments. Sanctity is nothing if not the dramatic display of a human ideal.

Sociologists of religion point to the cult of the saints as one of the more telling examples of the persistency and appeal of popular religious feeling. There is a great deal of truth in this. In Roman Catholicism, the cult of the saints has, of course, been widespread, even while being perceived, at times, as defiantly subversive of formal orthodoxy: a parallel theological and devotional discourse, as it were, to that of the Catholic hierarchy. This is an intriguing aspect of the dynamics of sainthood. It underscores the particular quality of the cult of saints in challenging established social conventions. Some scholars have highlighted the unique role of devotion to certain saints as a means of “acquiring power” for those who may be culturally marginal. Interestingly enough, though excessive devotion to saints may sometimes make the Catholic Church nervous, no other pope than the current one has canonized as many saints during his pontificate. This eloquently demonstrates the indispensability of tactile and sensual religiosity – which is what the devotion to saints really is – in ultimately shoring up the often shifting and increasingly disputed foundations of institutionalized belief.

There is another very important dimension of sainthood which should be highlighted. Saints tend to be trendsetters, gadflies, troublemakers, and agents of change. Think of Francis of Assisi and his radical challenge to the wealth of the Medieval church, or of Paul and his critical part in the emergence of Christianity from its Jewish roots, or of people like Thomas More and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in standing up to state power. More from our era, consider the non-violence of Ghandhi in the birth of India, or the all too numerous orders of good sisters founded by pious women in response to a variety of 19th century social ills and problems. Think of the charity of Dorothy Day, or the zeal and

learning of Ignatius of Loyola, or, yes, the world-changing passion and conviction of a Martin Luther. These are men and women who were often thorns in the sides of religious and secular institutions, but whose bravery, foresight, and incredible persistence altered our world in some fundamental ways. Some of them actually became revered by the very churches and prelates they railed against. These saints (and they were certainly full of human foibles, some of them ^{even} sexual), these holy men and women blazed new paths for us, opened up new vistas, gave us new ways of understanding ourselves and our proper relations to each other and to the broader world. Indeed, one could say they were cultural revolutionaries and prophets at many different levels.

As for me, my saints are tactile and sensual, and their bodies, real or imagined, played a significant part in my religious and erotic life, *as I described on Tuesday morning.* My saints were and are the men of my dreams. They are the companions of my imaginary voyages and of my quest for spiritual fulfillment. There can be no doubt that these saints circumscribed my earliest attempts at making sense of the unique Catholicism in which I grew up: a Catholicism marked by an obsession with ritual and imagery, ~~and which I still so desperately crave at times.~~ They were my earliest spiritual friends and mentors, the very real embodiment of what I thought it might mean to be a committed believer. In this sense, they were true religious icons and symbols. When I was picked on by my playmates for whatever reason (usually because I couldn't throw a ball or do similar boyish things), I could transform myself into the Roman martyr persecuted by his pagan tormenters. When I thought of escaping the dullness of my adolescent existence, I could fantasize about being a missionary in some far-flung part of the earth (usually with Robinson Crusoe on his lonely island – I wonder

why?), ministering to exotic and dangerous natives. Saints were a way of asserting my solitude and my difference, and of somehow ennobling them with a more just and cohesive purpose. I suspect most gay boys develop similar strategies of their own for coping with their isolation. They model their behavior and reactions on what they think are more appealing and meaningful exemplars of masculinity, whether these be their fathers or older brothers, or the heroes and tough guys of the movies and cartoons. It just so happened that my choices were more religious, if perhaps a bit more unusual, than *those* of most of my peers.

I want to make a bold and serious statement. I believe that queer people are called to be saints. I don't mean this in some sappy theological sense, having to do with a vague universal summons to sanctity for all humans. I mean something far more compelling and immediate, yet, at the same time, far more demanding. In fact, I believe we already are saints, both in culture at large, and in spirituality and religion specifically. We are both prophets and revolutionaries, dangerous subversives and the forerunners, as David Nimmons would have it, of a new social ethics. We need to be serious about this. We need to remember that, yes, we have a specific vocation, a calling, a mission. And it is one which, in many ways, we all too often choose to ignore, or simply dismiss as being outlandish and self-serving. Yet the signs are all around us. We know the profound and lasting impact we are having on human culture. We all know that, together with our feminist colleagues, we are altering, perhaps forever, notions of God and gender. And most importantly, we are offering our fellow humans an amazing and colorful panoply of erotic choices. If for nothing else, John Paul should canonize us all tomorrow.

I jest, but not really. I am certainly not suggesting that we should all strive to be virgin martyrs or models of ascetic self-mortification (well, perhaps only in our kinky bondage fantasies!). What I am proposing is nothing less than a re-claiming of the language of sanctity for a highly secularized world and for a culture which is sadly lacking in models of human greatness. I do not think queers are better than others, but I do think, as David Nimmons suggests, that we are unique in creating, at this time and in this place, some very different and special modes of cultural expression, all of which – from our forms of social interaction to our ways of caring for each other – are charting a new course for humans as a whole. I call that sanctity. I call that prophecy. I call that vision. I call us a communion of saints.

Not the least of the new gifts that we bring to the human family is a revaluation of desire and pleasure, this potent “bliss” which can be a source of such enmity within and outside our communities. Nimmons is quite right in saying that we are simultaneously feared and envied because of it. Michael Bronski asserts the same thing when he claims that it is our drive for non-utilitarian, non-procreative pleasure in all its forms that apparently poses such a threat, unfounded though it be, to a certain narrow vision of the American national character. You may recall in my first talk the discussion about devotion and excess, and how both are necessary to a vitally creative spiritual life, to say nothing of a healthy sex life. One of the great lessons we have always taught others, and one of the fundamental reasons, I believe, why we are still so much disliked in certain quarters, is precisely ~~that~~ *because*

we assert of the primacy of pleasure to the human experience, particularly unbridled erotic fun. We are a sexual people. How could it be any other way? It is a gift that we bring.

Theologian Mark Jordan, in his most recent book, The Ethics of Sex, speaks perceptively of “redeeming pleasures.” It is a wonderful expression. It refers at once to the need to redeem or reclaim the notion of pleasure in the Christian moral tradition, but also to those erotic bodily pleasures that are, in and of themselves, meaningful sources of salvation and redemption. He argues that our erotic practices can teach us spiritual truths, and, equally, that our spiritual practices and disciplines can teach us about the erotic. He speaks, for example, of how “...intense private prayer resembles masturbation,” remarking that “Our intimate encounters with God through prayer are erotic because they are the pleasurable intimacies of creatures with bodies. So the Christian teaching about prayer is really the Christian ars amatoria,” the Christian art of love. He draws similar parallels between sadomasochism and forms of Christian asceticism, and between liturgy and physical pleasure. I find such observations brilliantly perceptive and hopeful, for they remind us how a slight shift in perspective can fundamentally alter our appreciation and valuation of human pleasure as a good and necessary form of pedagogy – indeed, as a privileged path to spiritual and religious illumination.

I offer a further reflection from Jordan: “I am suggesting (...) that our union with God in prayer is the fulfillment of our capacity for erotic pleasure. It is what our erotic capacity prepares us for, what it is given for. We use erotic imagery quite appropriately to describe forms of prayer because our ordinary experience of the erotic is on the way to the experience of union with God. If this suggestion has any plausibility, then we can reverse the movement from eros to prayer. When Paul compares the church’s relation to Christ with the relations of wife and husband, he means to teach both about the church

and about marriage. The one is the completion of the other. So too with sex and prayer. We can borrow the language of sex to describe prayer, but then we can also borrow what we learn about prayer to guide our sexual relations.” Somehow, I have this wicked and delicious vision of whispering this truth in the ear of the next kneeling gay man I happen to come across!

Let me tease out, ~~ever so carefully~~, some of the implications of what Jordan might mean in terms of the form of erotic desire and pleasure that I am most familiar with, gay male sexuality. ~~And you thought I wouldn't come back to the top and bottom thing!~~

If, indeed, our spiritual practices can teach us about the erotic, as can the reverse, then gay men, by virtue of the amorphous quality of their sexual choices, can open our vision to an appreciation for the sweet ambivalence of the sacred, its uniquely diffused, unstable character. In our spiritual lives, all of us have experienced what it means to “wait upon the Spirit,” and the simultaneously arid and ecstatic feelings it can bring about. We joke about the top and bottom thing, about who’s active or passive, and we invent strange acronyms for positioning, differentiating and specializing ourselves, as any personals column in any gay rag will attest. Though amusing at times, I would argue that such flexibility and polyvalence in our erotic object-choices and our sexual couplings are a wonderful gift of the Creator, reflective of how the Spirit moves and shapes the universe. I have always thought that my openness to an active receptivity, as well as its flip side, make me uniquely susceptible, as a gay man, to spiritual awakening, for the force of life is both top and bottom, as it were. ~~Certainly, heterosexual men do not fully experience~~

this aspect of the creative dynamic. It is something which, though not unique to the gay experience in an exclusive or closed sort of way, still conditions our sensibility and our outlook with respect to both the material and the spiritual forces at play in the world.

What might this mean? First, that we understand rapture, the total and unconditional merging with the erotic force, and this, from a position of extreme, powerful, and life-asserting vulnerability. Reminds one of ecstatic prayer, or of baptism in the Spirit, the speaking of tongues while talking dirty. Second, that ours, rather than being the merging of difference, is all about the resplendence and multiplication of sameness, same flesh become same flesh. Take this body, same as yours, and eat of it. Reminds one of the co-extensive father and son. And thirdly, something to do with idolatry and images of the divine force. I am currently doing research back in Montreal on a group of modern-day phallus worshipers, the Temple of Priapus. Initially, the idea appears bizarre and a tad outlandish. From our Christianized perspective, we tend to judge such groups as though they were remnants of a pagan mystery religion. We tend to be colonialist in our outlook, like the victor writing history – or we sound moralistic and judgmental in tone: “it’s only an excuse for an orgy,” as I have heard so often. But when one reads seriously through their texts, or thinks about their prayers, or studies their rituals, or even engages in a mild form of phallus worship of one’s own, one’s perspective suddenly and quite unexpectedly shifts. One moves to a deeper and more subtle appreciation of how the most basic and intimate of human acts can be imprinted with a touch of the holy, and how significant a difference that makes to our spiritual outlook. It is said that gay men are obsessed with the body. I say this obsession is a grace. It is really a devotion written in the heavens, an

for example,
 earthly strategy for engagement with the divine force. Phallus worship has nothing at all to do with the empty and meaningless sucking of male genitalia, and everything to do with an awareness of desire as a path to spiritual wholeness. It is a discipline.

Sanctity inevitably requires discipline, an absolute, clear-headed focussing on the core values and essential truths of a given spiritual path. If same-sex desire can provide such a path, then it is essential that we commit ourselves fully to it. In many ways, we already are, though my sense is that, all too often, the dynamic links between sex and spirit are by no means obvious to us. We rebel against the idea; we reject its inherent good; we giggle and snicker about its implications. I suspect most queer people find the idea of our erotic choices as sources of spiritual enlightenment to be slightly outlandish, if not scandalous. More often than not, I am told that these are little more than rationalizations for simple promiscuous behavior, an unnecessary though perhaps amusing attempt at justifying what is essentially a biological drive, nothing less, and certainly nothing more. Yet the stories of our lives are sacred legends, woven with the threads of our pain and rejection, but also written in the bright and polished gold of our pride and affirmation. Yes, there truly is something quite special and defiantly grand about our forms of erotic desire. They are wonderfully subtle teachers, as all forms of saintly discipline are.

It is good and healthy at times to come back to our roots. I want to return to the thinking and insights of two of our forefathers. The first are some powerful words from Edward Carpenter: "Our public opinion, our literature, our customs, our laws, are saturated with the notion of the uncleanness of Sex. Till this dirty and dismal sentiment with regard to

the human body is removed there can be little hope of anything like a free and gracious public life. The sex-relation must be divested of the sentiment of uncleanness which surrounds it, and rehabilitated again with a sense of almost religious consecration. And this means... a free people, proud in the mastery and the divinity of their own lives, and in the beauty and openness of their own bodies.” The second series of words resonate with the defiant passion of Harry Hay: “Our beautiful sexuality is the gateway to spirit. It’s different from how all the other religions feel, they need a separation between carnality and spirituality. We see it all as one big ball of wax. Sex and spirit are all one big picture, and that infuses human life. It pushes life into you. Whenever you make love with another man you are exercising spirit.”

Of course, I would be remiss if I did not also refer to the engaging words of one of our eminent matriarchs, Carter Heyward: “...the erotic is our most fully embodied experience of the love of God. It is the source of our capacity for transcendence, or the “crossing over” among ourselves, making connections between and among ourselves. The erotic is the divine Spirit’s yearning, through us, toward mutually empowering relation which becomes our most fully embodied experience of God as love. (...) And how do we know this? We know this by living life, by experiencing the power in mutuality. (...) In the context of mutually empowering relationship, we come to realize that our shared experience of our power in mutual relations is sacred: that by which we are called forth more fully into becoming who we are – whole persons, whose integrity is formed in our connection with one another. And our shared power, this sacred resource of creation and liberation, is powerfully erotic.”

What Carpenter, Hay, and Heyward are talking about is the work of saints: the work of queer people at this time and in this place, in the highways and byways of 21st century living, with all its crazy uncertainties and mad juxtapositions. Carpenter summons us to a healthy and necessary revaluation of same-sex eroticism as a vital source of regeneration for the public good; Hay, to its unique possibilities as the genesis of spiritual revelation; and Heyward, to its grounding in the mystery of human mutuality. What all three call for is a type of queer ethical living, one grounded in the singular charge and energy of same-sex desire, yet able to speak prophetically both to queer culture and to the more limiting and damaging heterosexist one.

Yes, I believe queer people are a special people, a breed apart. Yes, I believe that we were put here to place all things into question, to challenge the normative, to sketch out different human possibilities. Yes, I believe that we have a vocation, that the Spirit chose us to do her urgent work of transformation and conversion. Yes, I believe that we are prophets, healers, and seers, that our common touch of desire, across centuries and across the room, can act beneficially and creatively in human history and culture. Above all, I believe that what we are called to do is to re-center and re-affirm erotic desire as a venue for transcendence and spiritual visioning. That, at heart, is what makes us who we are, but also what we could passionately and so beautifully become.

I should like to conclude, as might perhaps be expected, with a fantasy, one both saintly and erotic. Last month, my partner and I went on a Baltic cruise. We visited Russia, the former Baltic republics, and parts of Scandinavia. One of our stops was Riga, the capital

of Latvia. There, we visited St. John's Church, a former Dominican monastery dedicated to St. John the Baptist, but now of the Lutheran faith. It is an attractive, though by no means spectacular, church. What fascinated me most about visiting it was a story I had read about what happened there while it was still functioning as a Dominican monastic house in the Middle Ages. It seems that two young monks, in their penitential zeal to become saints, had themselves entombed behind a wall near the altar, where they lived out their days together in prayerful contemplation, while being fed by their brother monks through a small opening in the wall. Their skeletal remains are still there, and a plaque marks the spot. The story captivated my imagination. Call it an unhealthy obsession with saints, or perhaps an uncanny ability to see same-sex desire wherever it points itself, but I was, and still am, engrossed by this tale. Unfortunately, no details are available. I guess my imagination filled in the gaps.

This legend, ~~if you will~~, reminds me of actual stories that a friend and former colleague of mine, a trained Medievalist, has been working on for several years. They concern the lives of 14th-century cloistered women in southern Germany and Switzerland, and records of their special friendships and devotional practices, some of them quite physical and sexually charged. My friend writes of two young Bavarian nuns in particular, Margaret and Katherine: ““They made a door through the wall as if it were one cell because of their great desire to be near one another.” Their fellow sisters did not perceive this deep and very particular friendship as an obstacle to devotion. On the contrary, the text makes it clear that their fellow sisters saw it not only as the source of Margaret and Katherine's earnest devotional practices, but also as a source of delight for the convent as a whole.”

My fantasy runs along several analogous fault lines. I imagine that these two young *Latvian* friars were homosexual, that they were, in fact, deeply attracted to each other, but that, because of their vows, they felt unable to express their need. I imagine that, in their quest for companionship and a more perfect spiritual life, they agreed to commit themselves as a couple to this form of bodily mortification. I imagine that they were able to create a somewhat cozy though Spartan home in their walled-up space, engaging themselves in the daily cycle of monastic contemplation. I imagine that they attained the heights of mystical experience, nurtured by prayer and penance. But above all, I imagine that, at some point, somehow, they desired and partook of each other's body, giving free rein to their erotic hunger one for the other, and that this became an intense source of religious and contemplative illumination. I imagine that they were given the spiritual powers of healing and prophecy, were respected far and wide as sage healers and seers, and that they died, as with Margaret and Katherine, only days from each other. In their time, they were publicly regarded as saints, but the Church, having caught wind of their particular sexual proclivities, squelched any attempt at canonization. There they still lie behind that church wall, their bones entwined forever, two sodomite-saints.

This may read as a wonderfully fantastic story, but I really don't see why it can't be true. I mean, of course, that such lives, real or imagined, as romantic as we may picture them to be, can serve as templates for the amazingly rich diversity and sheer tenacity of queer people. Nothing is known about these two Latvian Dominican monks, so my story could well be within the realm of the possible. The important thing here is not what I may have invented about them, or about their relationship or their spirituality, but the fact that two

unknown Medieval monks, who I think were queer, have touched me across time, me a 21st century queer man. I resonated so strongly to their story, as sketchy as it may have been, precisely because we share (and I do use the present tense) a common queer frame of reference, one both sexual and spiritual. This, I do believe, is the Spirit talking to us as queer people, the same Spirit who inspired me to recount this queer legend to you queer people sitting here this morning. And in telling you this story and sharing this fantasy, I have made it possible for you to touch them in their silent wall space, and they, you.

Sexuality is all about bodies: messy, desiring, erotic, uncertain, gendered human bodies. Spirituality is also about bodies: messy, desiring, erotic, uncertain, gendered – and yes, praying and suffering – human bodies. We can't get away from it. It all comes back to this thing that we walk around with every day. The challenge for all of us, but perhaps more for you as ministers of the faith, is to remember the body. We have called it many names over time: temple, holy, corrupt, and sinful, among others. Queer bodies, which have been, above all, controlled and broken bodies, bodies acted upon by the self-serving interests of power and force, need to be reaffirmed and rehabilitated. Thankfully, we are already doing that, providing, through them, models for the elaboration of a new way of living together, a new and compellingly different public ethic. *Queen saints indeed.*

Queer bodies are, finally, bodies in the throes of ecstasy. They are bodies which scream savagely and passionately at the height of orgasmic union. They are also bodies which murmur and yell the divine name in fits of mystical fusion. They are bodies in erotic relation, both horizontally and vertically. Queer is as queer loves, and as queer prays.

Thank you very much.